

# Hashira-e

18th Century Pillar Prints



RONINGALLERY





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**18th Century Pillar Prints**

**RONIN GALLERY**

425 Madison Ave. New York, NY 10017

The Largest Collection of Japanese Prints in the U.S.  
Contemporary Asian Art

September 2014

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## Hashira-e: 18th Century Pillar Prints

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**D**uring the 18th century's golden age of artistic innovation, woodblock print artists experimented with coloring, line, composition, and print format, developing works of art that stand among the most unique and inventive images in ukiyo-e. Some of the rarest and most exciting prints from this period are hashira-e, or pillar prints.

The 18th century was the renaissance of the prosperous and relatively peaceful Edo period. The increasingly centralized power of the shogun was accompanied by the creation of highly codified classes, producing the outward appearance of social stability. The merchant class, or *chonin*, progressively became the generative force of popular culture. Their increasing wealth could be used in highly delineated urban quarters of pleasure and consumption within the city of Edo. These exciting, new, and diverse places where classes could co-mingle progressively became the driving force behind the subject and style of Japanese woodblock printing. Developments in printing techniques, like the ability to print in multiple colors (*nishiki-e*), also made individual sheet prints more and more popular among the wealthy rising class and everyday consumers alike. The images became brighter, more colorful, complex, and reflected the everyday culture of urban Japan: the Kabuki theatre, beautiful women of the pleasure quarters, freedom of travel, and other aspects of the "floating world." Artists of this period, inspired by the vibrancy of their audience, experimented voraciously.

In traditional ukiyo-e, the size of the print is an integral, if overlooked, component of the finished work of art. The sakura, or cherry tree, was the preferred wood for the printing blocks, and therefore the size of the block was generally dictated by the diameter of the tree. Due to these restrictions, several standard print sizes quickly developed. The most common sizes are the *ōban* and *chūban* sizes, approximately 10 by 15 inches and 7 ½ by 10 inches, respectively. The less common formats tend to be either long and narrow, or wider and taller overall, or smaller and square, and while these more unusual sizes present their own challenges to the printing

process, they also allow the ukiyo-e artist to be experimental, imaginative, and innovative within the design's compositional limitations.

The hashira-e (sometimes *hashirae-ban*), or pillar print, is the rarest of these unusual print formats. At a size of approximately 4 by 28 inches, it is the narrowest of the Edo period prints. Its exaggerated verticality and slim width was originally intended for decoration of the interior supporting pillars in traditional Japanese architecture, hence the name, "pillar prints." Artists soon realized that the format itself was freeing and full of potential. This allowed for compositions brimmed with the grace and emotion of artfully employed negative space and vertical dynamism. Subjects range from the traditional renderings of *bijin* (beautiful women), to legendary figures and heroes, to birds and flowers, but always the narrow plane of the hashira-e provided a daring space for artistic imagination and expression.

This exhibition features work by the best artists of the golden age of ukiyo-e: Harunobu, Koryusai, Utamaro, Kiyonaga, Eishi, and Masanobu. Harunobu's tall and slender *bijin* were ideally suited to the narrow format of the pillar print, and Koryusai took Harunobu's graceful compositions of women and transformed them into a body of work that is unrivaled in its stately, majestic elegance; Kiyonaga is regarded as the period's other great artist of beautiful women. Utamaro's hashira-e are perhaps the most complex compositions of the time, incorporating portraiture into the undulating S-curve that serves the narrow, vertical format so well. Masanobu's pillar print designs are extremely rare, and feature the bold lines and dynamic compositions that speak to the exuberance of the artistic period.

Because of their unusual format, and the fact that they were often used in the home where they would be exposed to smoke and dirt, well-preserved hashira-e today are quite rare and exceedingly precious. This exhibition of these unique prints demonstrates the enormous versatility and groundbreaking innovation of the artists of the golden age.

## Artists

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### **EISHI (1756 – 1829):**

Born into a samurai family of the Fujiwara clan, Eishi resided in Edo and was educated in the grand tradition of Kano-school painting. He became a court painter and high court official to the Tokugawa shogun Ieharu, working in the court approved Kano style. At around the age of thirty, Eishi left the court and began working in ukiyo-e. Initially influenced by the Torii school, he soon found inspiration in Utamaro's work and began producing bijin-ga, pictures of beautiful women. As Eishi's style developed, he soon settled into a style of his own, defined by aristocratic elegance and refinement; his women tall, lean, and elegant. It is said that his prints were so highly regarded by the time of his death in 1829 that even the imperial family sought to own them.

### **HARUNOBU (1725 –1770):**

Suzuki Harunobu is considered to be one of the finest ukiyo-e artists of the early golden age of woodblock printing. He is accredited with the important innovation of nishiki-e: "brocade prints" that are distinguished by their rich, complex, and saturated application of color. It is reported that the innovator Shigenaga was his teacher, but most of his early pieces show no indication of this. Instead, it seems as if he drew inspiration from Sukenobu, the Kyoto based print designer who was known for his depictions of actors and beautiful women. Harunobu's own innovative approach to printing catapulted him to fame and he became well known for his elegant women, light and airy compositions, and his depictions of simple pleasures in everyday Edo-period life.

### **KORYUSAI (active 1769 – 1788):**

Koryusai was born into the samurai class in the middle of the 18th century. However, despite his privileged background he chose to study the art of woodblock printing. Many of his subjects were drawn from history and literature and featured studies of bijin-ga. His style was greatly inspired by Harunobu, yet still remained distinct, as Koryusai's own work was less dreamlike and used different color palettes. In the tradition of hashira-e, no other artist is more prolific than Koryusai: his long, narrow compositions feature the majestic, stately figures of beautiful women, arranged into sensual, undulating compositions.

### **KIYONAGA (1752 – 1815):**

Born in Uruga to a bookseller, Kiyonaga moved to Edo in 1765 and began his art education under the direction of Torii Kiyomatsu. Following the death of his master, he was adopted into the Torii family and is generally considered the last great member of the Torii school. Kiyonaga was a major printmaker during late 18th century Edo; his work had great influence on other artists and he is recognized for his intelligent use of color and the elegance of his bijin-ga. In 1787, Kiyonaga arranged for the Torii school to design kabuki signboards that would eventually lead to their virtual monopoly over the industry.

### **KITAO MASANOBU (1761 – 1816):**

Masanobu was born and lived in Edo where during his formative years he studied under the great "chameleon" print artist, haikai master, and shodo calligrapher Kitao Shigemasa. Masanobu was also known as the famous Edo period writer and poet Santō Kyōden, publishing dozens of kibyoshi, or humorous and satirical illustrated books. Masanobu's work drew on new printing techniques and his own pioneering use of western perspective to produce works on a wide range of subject matter. He is seen as one of the most inspirational artists of his generation.



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**SHUNCHO (fl.1783 – 1795):**

Shuncho studied under Katsukawa Shunsho. In his early career he was also greatly influenced by the artist Harunobu and produced a number of very well received prints depicting beautiful women. As his career progressed he turned his attention to bust and head portraits of Kabuki actors, winning great acclaim for his work. His style stood out from his contemporaries, as the subjects of his work were easily recognizable.

**UTAMARO (1753 – 1806):**

Utamaro is one of the unparalleled masters of woodblock printing. Initially, he studied under scholar-artist Sekien, until Sekien's passing in 1788. Utamaro is especially well known for his prints of women whose subtlety of mood and personality he was able to capture in on paper. He was a prolific artist who also produced illustrated books and a number of paintings; it is estimated that in his lifetime he produced over two thousand individual artworks. In 1804, Utamaro ran into legal trouble with the Tokugawa Shogunate. He was sentenced and imprisoned for a short time; some believe that this broke Utamaro's spirit and he died in Edo two years later in 1806, at the age of fifty-three. After Perry opened Japan and ukiyo-e prints began to spread across the globe, his work became enormously influential for many of the late 19th-century Impressionists in Europe and America.

**TOYOHITO (1773 – 1828):**

Born and raised in Edo, Utagawa Toyohito entered the studio of Toyoharu alongside his contemporary Toyokuni in 1782, studying both ukiyo-e woodblock printing and Kano school painting. Toyohito mostly worked in hosoban (long and narrow prints) and surimono (privately commissioned) formats but also produced and developed landscape prints. An artist possessed with an elegant and graceful touch, Toyohito is most well known for teaching and influencing the most famous landscape printer of the Edo period, Hiroshige.

# The Prints

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**Courtesan Somenosuke from Matsubaya**

Eishi (1756 - 1829)

Woodblock Print

c. 1795

ref #: JPR5369

Illustrated in Pins, The Japanese Pillar Print, #852.  
Another impression of this print is at the  
Museum of Fine Arts Boston.



**Bijin in Summer Kimono Holding a Goldish Bowl**  
Eishi (1756 - 1829)  
Woodblock Print  
c. 1790  
Eishi ga  
ref #: JP5801

Illustrated in Pins, The Japanese Pillar Print, #875.





**After the Bath**  
Eishi (1756 - 1829)  
Woodblock Print  
c. 1790  
Eishi ga  
ref #: JP5783

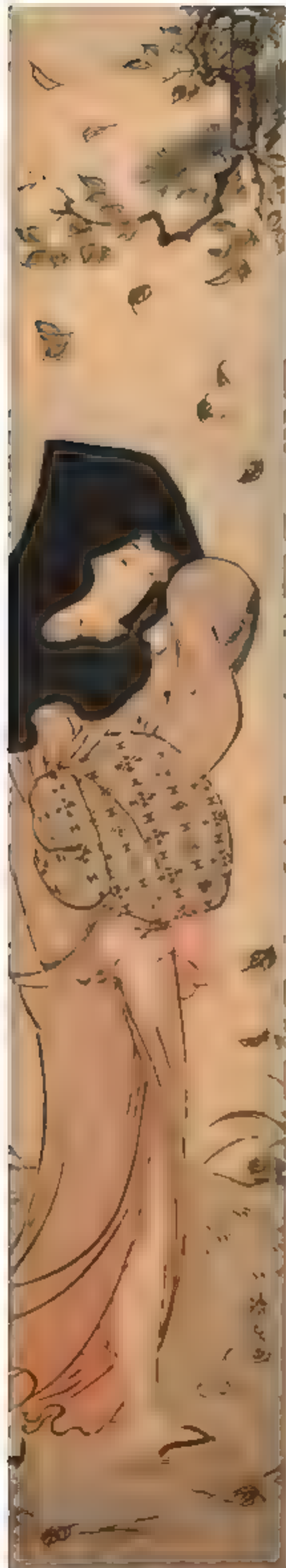
Illustrated in Pins, The Japanese Pillar Print, #866.



**Ono no Komachi**  
Harunobu (1725 - 1770)  
Woodblock Print  
c. 1765  
Harunobu ga  
ref # JP2619

Illustrated in Pins, The Japanese Pillar Print, #144.  
Another impression of this print is at the  
Metropolitan Museum of Art (NYC).





**Falling Leaves**

Kiyonaga (1752 - 1815)

Woodblock Print

1783

Kiyonaga ga

ref # JPR5772

Illustrated in Pins, The Japanese Pillar Print, #603.  
Another impression of this print is at the  
Museum of Fine Arts Boston.



**Young Woman Under Umbrella**

Kiyonaga (1752 - 1815)

Woodblock Print

1783

Kiyonaga ga

ref # JP5675

Illustrated in Pins, The Japanese Pillar Print, #652.  
Another impression of this print is at the  
Honolulu Museum of Art.





**A Chushingura Parody, Act VII**

Kiyonaga (1752 - 1815)

Woodblock Print

c. 1790

Kiyonaga ga

ref # JP5803

Another impression of this print is at the Honolulu Art Museum and Art Institute of Chicago.



**The Tease**

Koryusai (fl.1769 - 1788)

Woodblock Print

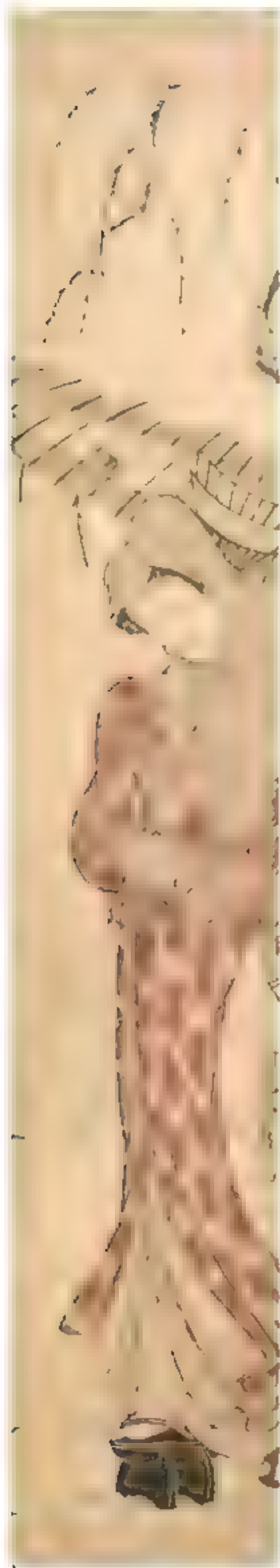
c. 1770

Koryu ga

ref #. JP5494

Illustrated in Pins, The Japanese Pillar Print, #412  
and in the British Museum's Harunobu & His Age,  
page 89.





**Beauty in Snow**  
Koryusai ( fl.1769 - 1788)  
Woodblock Print  
c. 1770  
Koryusai ga  
ref # JP2602

Ex Ledoux Collection  
Ex Van Biema Collection

Illustrated in Pins, The Japanese Pillar Print, #335.  
Another impression of this print is at the  
Ritsumeikan University Museum of Art.



**Young Woman Inside Mosquito Net**  
Koryusai ( fl.1769 - 1781)  
Woodblock Print  
c. 1770  
Koryusai ga  
ref # JP5769



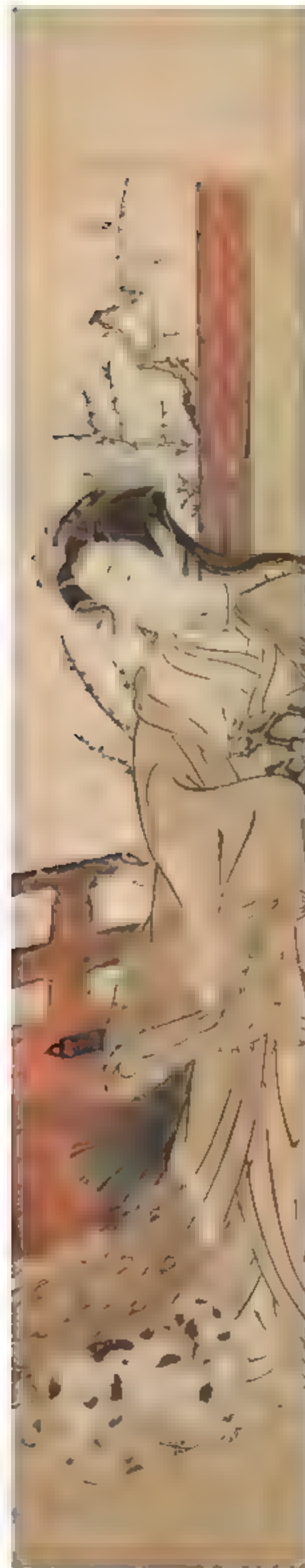


**Cooling Off**  
Koryusai ( fl.1769 - 1781)  
Woodblock Print  
c. 1770  
Koryusai ga  
ref # JP5770

Illustrated in Pins, The Japanese Pillar Print, #435.

**The Cat**  
Koryusai ( fl.1769 - 1781)  
Woodblock Print  
c. 1770  
ref # JP5771

Another impression of this print is at the  
University of Madison-Wisconsin Chazen  
Museum of Art and the de Young-Legion of  
Honor Fine Arts Museum of San Francisco.







**Courtesan from Ogi-ya**  
Koryusai ( fl.1769 - 1781)  
Woodblock Print  
c. 1770  
Koryu hitsu with kao seal  
ref # JPR5422

Another impression of this print is at the  
British Museum.

**Female Warrior Tomoe-gozen on a Horse**  
Koryusai (fl.1769 - 1781)  
Woodblock Print  
c. 1770  
Koryu ga  
ref # JP5782

Another impression of this print is at the  
Harvard Art Museum.





**Young Man Cleaning Snow  
from Lover's Geta**

Koryusai ( fl.1769 - 1781)

Woodblock Print

c. 1770

Koryusai ga

ref # JP5802

Illustrated in Pins, The Japanese Pillar Print, #336.



**Lovers Under Blossoming Tree**

Kitao Masanobu (1761 - 1816)

Woodblock Print

c. 1795

Masanobu ga with kao seal

ref #. JPR5423

Illustrated in Pins, The Japanese Pillar Print, #592.





**The Fan Vendor**

Kitao Masabobu (1761 - 1816)

Woodblock Print

c. 1795

Masanobu ga

ref # JP5776

Illustrated in Pins, The Japanese Pillar Print, #594.

**Viewing Cherry Blossoms**

Shuncho ( fl.1783 - 1795)

Woodblock Print

c. 1783

Shuncho ga

ref #. JPR5003

Illustrated in Pins, The Japanese Pillar Print, #762.

Another impression of this print is at the  
Museum of Fine Arts Boston.







**Warrior Capturing a Tiger**

Shunei (1762 - 1819)

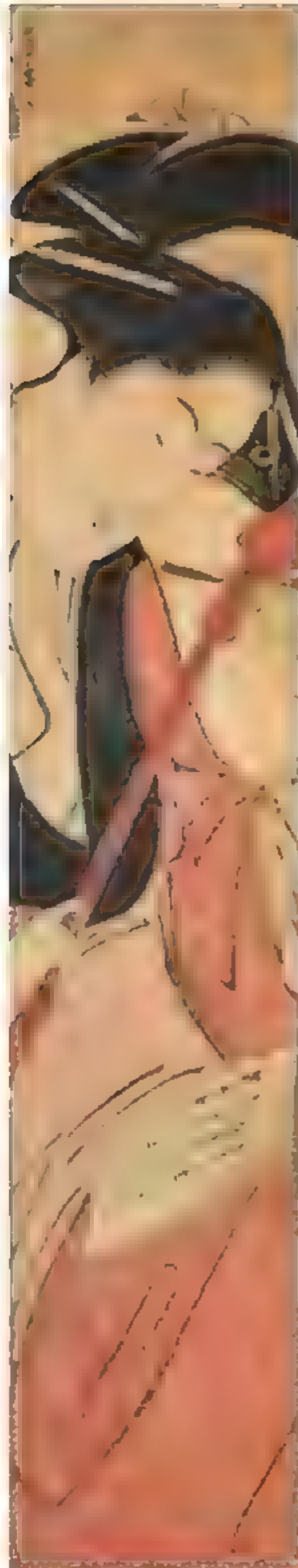
Woodblock Print

c. 1790

Shunei ga

ref # JP5781

**Music Lesson**  
Toyohiro (1773 - 1828)  
Woodblock Print  
c. 1800  
Toyohiro ga  
ref # JP5773





**Mother and Child**  
Utamaro (1753 - 1806)  
Woodblock Print  
c. 1798  
Utamaro hitsu  
ref # JP5775

illustrated in Pins, The Japanese Popular Print, #788.  
Another impression of this print is at the  
Library of Congress, the British Museum,  
and the Museum of Fine Arts Boston.



**Lovers Komurasaki and Gonpachi**

Utamaro (1753 - 1806)

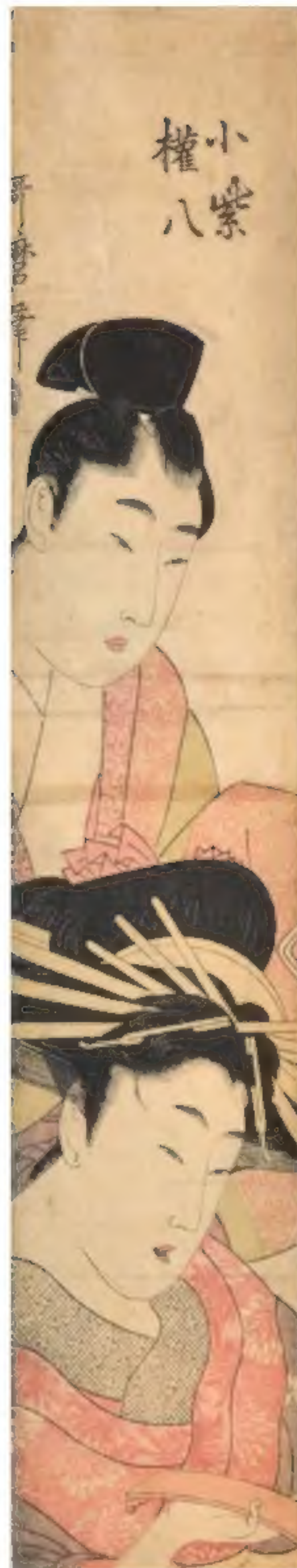
Woodblock Print

c. 1798

Utamaro hitsu

ref #: JP5778

Illustrated in Pins, The Japanese Pillar Print, #800.





**Eagle on Pine Tree**  
Utamaro (1753 - 1806)  
Woodblock Print  
c. 1798  
Utamaro hitsu  
ref #: JP5774

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